

Chris O'Brien

From: Erik Christiansen <echristiansen@ricaft.org>
Sent: Wednesday, May 5, 2021 8:02 AM
To: House Finance Committee
Subject: written testimony budget hearing 5.5.2021

Dear Members of the House Finance Committee,

As president of the RIC/AFT, the full-time faculty union at Rhode Island College, I want to express the faculty's grave concerns regarding the governor's proposed budget. By reducing the allocation requested by the college by nearly 6 million dollars, the governor's budget shortchanges the college and our students, and is unacceptable. We ask that you restore the \$5.9 million that the governor's budget removes from RIC's budget request as approved by the Council on Postsecondary Education.

In 2018 the state government, including the governor's staff and the Council on Postsecondary Education, negotiated a contract with RIC faculty. After decades of severely underpaying RIC faculty, the state leadership agreed to a salary correction plan that would phase in salaries equivalent to the average of RIC's peer institutions by FY2022. Formerly RIC faculty salaries were significantly below all peer institutions, so getting to the midpoint of our peers would require adding several million dollars to the FY2020, 2021, 2022 budgets. Unfortunately, in every budget since our contract was signed, the money has not been there. RIC has dutifully requested the increased allocation necessary to cover this contract (and others that require more modest increases), and each year the governor's budget has ignored the increased fixed costs and pretended these contracts don't exist. It's not right. Flat funding doesn't even account for inflation, and it obviously doesn't account for increased fixed costs due to contracts that were negotiated on behalf of the state government. To negotiate a contract and then fail to provide the allocation is not a sign of good faith. The state must honor the contracts negotiated by its Council on Postsecondary Education.

The consequences of this failure have been severe. All the unions at RIC, plus non-union administrators and other employees, had to accept pay cuts, furloughs, or deferred raises last year, and dozens of RIC employees and faculty were laid off. Academic departments no longer have the administrative assistants who previously had provided significant support to students. Dozens of courses were cancelled this year, and some students couldn't take the classes they needed in order to stay on track. Tuition must be raised again, which adds to the burden already carried by our students, half of whom are the first in their families to attend college. But the tuition increase isn't nearly enough to cover the deficit created by the governor's proposed budget.

I urge you to correct this mistake and restore the \$5.9 million to the budget that was approved by the Council on Postsecondary Education. That budget was carefully built by the RIC administration, faculty, and staff, through many difficult conversations. It includes many sacrifices but it also represents a responsible plan for the future. And that's why the Council supports it too. In contrast, the governor's budget is irresponsible – literally. It shirks responsibility for previously negotiated contracts and it punishes our hard-working students. Please do the right thing and fund the budget for RIC that the Council on Postsecondary Education approved.

Sincerely,

Erik Christiansen
President, RIC/AFT Faculty Union
Professor of History
Rhode Island College